



Klamath Network Featured Creature

December 2008

Northern Alligator Lizard (*Elgaria coerulea*)

FIELD NOTES:

General Description:

Northern alligator lizards are medium-sized and slender, have short limbs, a long tail, big bony scales, powerful jaws, and a large head. Head shape varies between sexes, with the male's being broader and more triangular. Adults' snout to vent length reaches 3-6 inches, with tails up to double this length making the lizard's total size 10-12 inches. The eyes are darkly pigmented. These lizards are typically solid brown, olive, or grey, or mottled with these colors and darker ones in spots and stripes. Young are more plainly colored than adults. Fourteen rows of scales line the center of the back. All the dorsal scales are at least slightly keeled, while the ventral scales are smooth. A different type of scale lines the sides of the body; these scales are normally folded together, but have the ability to expand to hold eggs, young, or food, and collapse again when not needed.

Diet:

Small invertebrates compose the bulk of the *Elgaria coerulea*'s food supply, including tasty snails, ticks, spiders, slugs, and worms. This lizard may also dine upon other small lizards, mammals, birds, and bird eggs. The northern alligator lizard, in a manner similar to its larger namesake - the alligator, often rolls around after clutching large prey in their jaws, allowing the lizard to tear off pieces to be eaten.

Behavior:

When threatened, one of its main defensive tactics is to break off its tail, distracting the enemy with this writhing appendage while the lizard scurries to safety. The tail will eventually grow back, although never as perfectly as the original. They are also good swimmers and may jump into the water to avoid predators.



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Jens V. Vindum © California Academy of Sciences

More Information:

California Herps:

<http://www.californiaherps.com/lizards/pages/e.c.principis.html>

Nussbaum, R. A., E. D. Brodie Jr., and R. M. Storm. 1983. Amphibians and reptiles of the Pacific Northwest. University of Idaho Press, Moscow,

Reproduction:

Females mature sexually at about 3 years. Mating occurs in April-June, depending on elevation. After a 7-10 week gestation, these viviparous lizards give birth to live young between June and September. Litter sizes may be 2-15, although the normal is 4.

Habitat:

These secretive diurnal lizards hide under brush and rock and hibernate in the cold months. They prefer woodlands, grasslands, and forests. Although they are most common in relatively wet, cool environments, they are found near sunny clearings as well. Preferring cooler temperatures than other lizards, the northern alligator lizard may be found at elevations up to 10,500'. Don't disturb these lizards where you find them though; when agitated, their strong bite can break human fingers!

Where to see it in the Klamath Parks:

Crater Lake, Lava Beds, Lassen Volcanic, Oregon Caves, Redwood, and Whiskeytown are all home to *E. coerulea*.

Distribution:

The northern alligator lizard and its subspecies are found throughout the Klamath region, extending north into southern British Columbia, south well into the Sierras and coastal California, and east into portions of Idaho and Montana.